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ABSTRACT

In 1996, individuals associated with the Lifelong Learning Center in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, proposed the formation of a three-district literacy consortium in a tricounty rural area that would cooperatively offer adults residing in the districts the option of earning a standard high school diploma in lieu of a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Although school districts in three counties adjacent to Schuylkill County were invited to join the consortium, only one large Northumberland County school district was prepared to commit to the project. A consortium committee consisting of seven representatives of Schuylkill County school districts and one Northumberland County school district was formed. Developing a workable plan for programming involving multiple entities proved more challenging and time consuming than originally planned. However, the consortium did adopt the general design for a program requiring all program participants to complete 90 hours of instruction in academic core subjects and demonstrate their ability to apply academic skills to real-life situations by completing a graduation portfolio. The consortium is currently in the process of finalizing the following products: graduation portfolio guidebook; 90-hour curriculum; written student recruitment strategy; and staff development plan. Implementation of the program is scheduled for the 1997-1998 funding year. (MN)

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RURAL CO-OPTIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

A 353 Final Report

Funding Year 1996-97

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RURAL CO-OPTIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Project #98-7006

A 353 Final Report

Funding Year 1996-97

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Federal Funding of project $10,000

Submitted by:
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract Page ----------	Page 1
Introduction ----------	Pages 2 & 3
Project Summary ----------	Pages 4 & 5
Flow Chart of Program Design ----------	Page 5
Project Challenges/Solutions ----------	Page 6
Final Products in Process ----------	Page 7
Comments/Observations ----------	Page 8

Project No. 98-7006

ABSTRACT PAGE

Grant Recipient:	The Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29 Maple Avenue P. O. Box 130 MarLin, PA 17901 (717) 544-9131
Grant Allocation:	$10,000
Project Period:	July 1, 1996 - June 30, 1997
Project Director:	Lyn Leto Coordinator of Special Services Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29
Project Purpose:	The project proposed the formation of a three-district literacy consortium in a tri-county rural area that would cooperatively offer adults residing in their districts the option of earning a standard high school diploma in lieu of a GED.
Impact:	Six districts, in a bi-county area forged a literacy consortium which will offer their regular high school diplomas to adults completing the consortium's diploma program. The consortium has adopted a general program design; has approved the development of a 90-hour curriculum, and has required the completion of a graduation portfolio by all program participants as an additional graduation requirement.
Products/Training Developed:	In production presently: A 90-hour curriculum; Graduation Portfolio guide books; A staff development plan; A public relations recruitment plan.
Project Continuation:	Implementation is scheduled for 1997-98 funding year.
Conclusions:	Developing a workable plan for programming involving multiple entities was more challenging and time consuming than originally planned. However, the promised benefits of serving a larger population promises to be great.

INTRODUCTION:
Rationale

Schuylkill County, a predominantly rural area, is home to 152,585 people, of whom 14.8% of the adults lack a high school diploma. Two adjacent rural counties have a similar population in need of either a GED or a standard high school diploma. Although the GED answers the needs of many of these people, the opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma would enable additional people to meet currently unattainable goals: joining the armed forces; enrolling in studies leading to a Registered Nursing degree; enjoying greater prestige in applying to colleges and/or the job market; and/or achieving a lifelong dream of a regular high school diploma.

Armed with these facts, and the existence and convenience of its Lifelong Learning Center, The Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29 set out to add a much-needed option to its menu of literacy services: a high school diploma program for adults.

Objectives for this program were:

1. To form a consortium of school districts in a tri-county rural area which would offer a "High School Diploma for Adults Program" as an alternative to the GED.
2. To establish the academic standards and lifeskill competencies which addressed the strategic plans of consortium districts.
3. To train a team of instructors and a program administrator ready to implement a "High School Diploma for Adults Program" during the 1997-98 school year.
4. To plan and implement a recruitment campaign which will attract an optimum number of adults in our target audience.

Personnel:

The Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29's Coordinator of Special Services served as Project Supervisor, planning and coordinating meetings with a committee consisting of the following program planners:

Director of Instruction, Pottsville Area School District
Superintendent, Shamokin Area School District
Superintendent, North Schuylkill School District
Senior High School Principal, Tamaqua Area School District
Counselor, Blue Mountain Area School District

The staff of the Cumberland Valley Adult Diploma Program served as advisors to the committee.

The following report of activities taking place between September, 1996 through June, 1997 may benefit other rural counties who wish to form partnerships which will enable the delivery of increased literacy services to an enlarged population.

Permanent copies of this report will be filed and available through the following sources:

Pennsylvania Department of Education
Bureau of Adult Basic & Literacy Education
333 Market Street, 12th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

AdvancE State Literacy Resource Center
333 Market Street, 11th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Western Pa. Adult Literacy Resource Center
5347 William Flynn Hwy. Rt. 8
Gibsonia, PA 15044-9644

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The primary project objective was to form a tri-county literacy consortium with Schuylkill County, and two other counties. The two other counties would be any two out of three adjacent, similarly-populated areas: Northumberland, Montour, and Columbia Counties.

However, despite expressed support for the proposal from at least one district within each targeted county, a "wait-and-see-attitude" emerged from the Montour and Columbia county districts. Therefore, we found it necessary to down-size our original plan to a bi-county consortium of schools representing Schuylkill and Northumberland Counties.

All district Superintendents from Schuylkill and Northumberland Counties were invited to an initial meeting held at the proposed based of our proposed program: The Lifelong Learning Center, located in The Schuylkill Mall, Frackville, Pennsylvania. In addition to the chief school administrators of the targeted districts, also in attendance were both the Executive and Assistant Executive Director of the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit #29. The project Director hosted the meeting with the Director of the Cumberland Valley District's Adult Diploma Program presenting the history of his diploma program. This meeting was a lively give and take of the pros and cons involved in such a program, with many districts resisting the proposal largely on the following premises: that a high school diploma program would "cheapen the high school diploma;" it would encourage high school drop outs; the GED was sufficient tool for adults without a diploma.

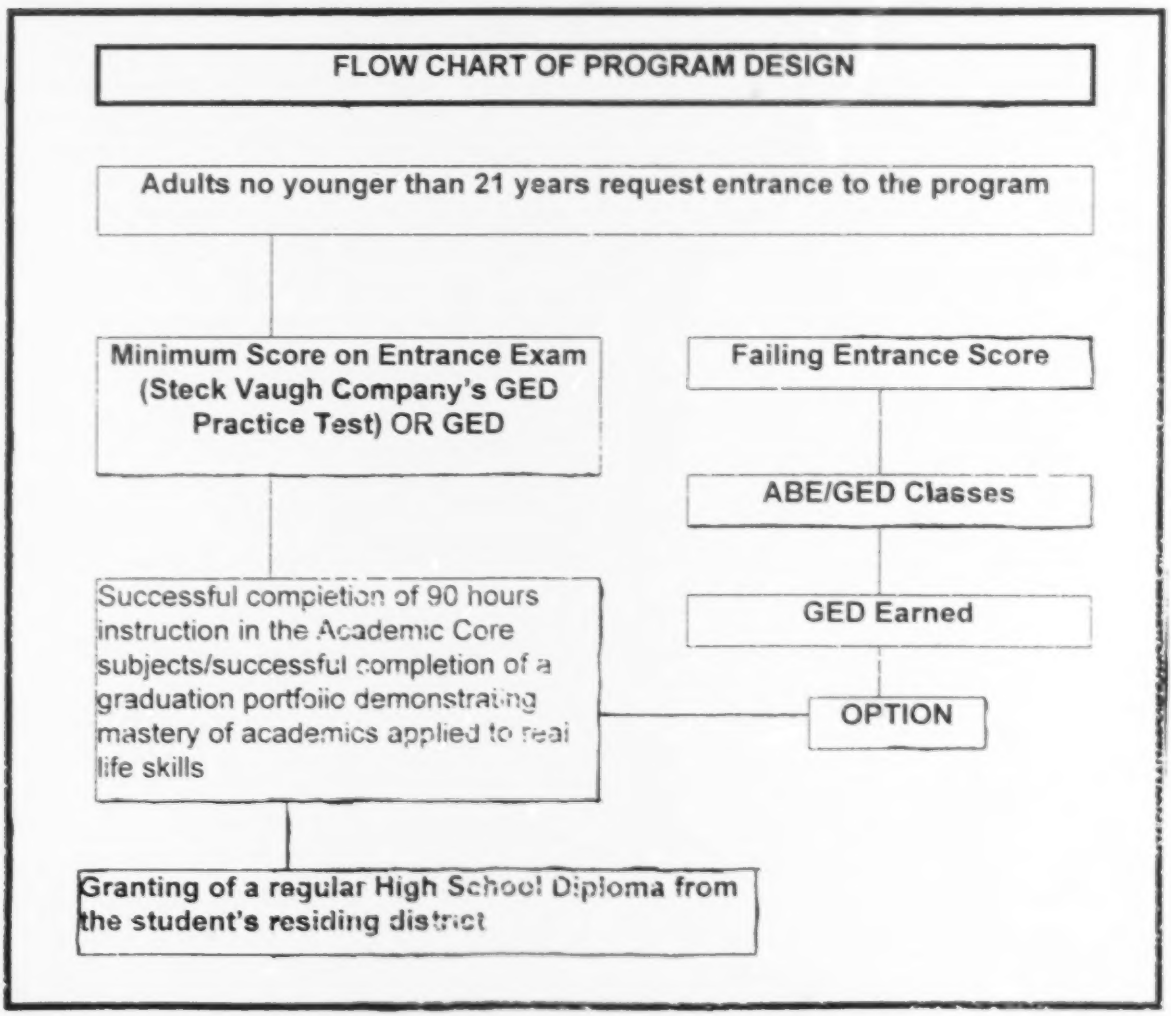
After much lively discussion, this first meeting gave birth to the original Consortium Committee consisting of seven representatives of Schuylkill County districts and one representative from a large Northumberland County school district.

The Consortium Committee's first official task was to explore the Cumberland Valley Adult Diploma Program. To do this, the Committee traveled to Cumberland Valley to meet with the entire Cumberland Valley Adult Diploma Team. This morning session proved to be invaluable in eliminating the negative perceptions carried by most Committee members. The lively, informal, and informative group interacted and answered all questions and concerns. Since our committee consisted primarily of district administrators, the presence of Cumberland Valley's Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent was helpful in enlisting the support of Committee members holding like administrative positions.

Following the Cumberland Valley meeting, the newly-formed and named "Schuylkill/Northumberland Literacy Consortium" met, on average, twice monthly and by the end of December, had reached agreement on the following:

1. Desirability and feasibility of the proposed adult diploma program.
2. Minimum age requirement
3. Program entry prerequisites.
4. Minimum standards
5. Graduation portfolio requirement demonstrating academic application to real life skills.
6. Agreement to present the program to each respective Board of Education for approval to implement.

The Flow Chart summarizing the Adult Diploma Program for Adults designed by The Schuylkill / Northumberland Literacy Consortium is reproduced here:


FLOW CHART OF PROGRAM DESIGN
Adults no younger than 21 years request entrance to the program
Minimum Score on Entrance Exam (Steck Vaugh Company's GED Practice Test) OR GED
Failing Entrance Score
ABE/GED Classes
GED Earned
OPTION
Successful completion of 90 hours instruction in the Academic Core subjects/successful completion of a graduation portfolio demonstrating mastery of academics applied to real life skills
Granting of a regular High School Diploma from the student's residing district

Project Challenges/Solutions:

1. Public Relations
2. Broad-based support
3. Process Time

Schuylkill and Northumberland counties are rural, conservative, and predictably resistant to change. Therefore, a major challenge to the proposed program existed in the anticipated resistance of the Boards of Education to approving the proposal for implementation. Despite the enthusiasm and support of the individual committee members, as February drew to a close, we began to worry that we would not get the approval of the minimum three districts as proposed. In order to increase our chances at reaching our goal, a plan was devised to enlist more program support.

A special evening meeting was planned with a dual purpose: To enlist the support of the districts represented in the Consortium at present and to make another effort at recruiting additional school districts into the project.

To reach these goals, the entire team of the Cumberland Valley High School Diploma Program for Adults agreed to do a seminar on their program at this proposed meeting. Invited to this event were a TEAM from all Schuylkill and Northumberland County districts consisting of the Superintendent, High School Principal, High School Counselor, and at least one Board Member.

Nine Schuylkill and two Northumberland County districts responded and sent the requested teams to this meeting in March of 1997. During the course of the evening, The Cumberland Valley Team expounded on the benefits of the high school diploma program, answering questions and concerns voiced by all participants.

This meeting was a turning point in enlisting support. After the meeting, three Schuylkill County school districts formerly not involved in the project, joined the Literacy Consortium and had procured written approvals from their respective Boards by June, 1997. In addition, three of the original Consortium members also acquired their Boards' approval. As a result, we have met our objectives of forming a multi-county consortium, albeit two rather than the planned three, but we will be implementing the project in a total of six districts, as opposed to the three originally proposed.

Because the entire process of recruiting consortium members was more time-intensive than originally anticipated, by June 39, 1997, the end of the funding year, we had not completed all of our objectives. However, all of the essential foundation has been laid and this program will be ready for implementation during the 1997-98 school year, beginning in October 1997.

Final Products in Process

Currently in process, with the final products to be included in next year's final report are:

1. Graduation Portfolio Guide Book
2. 90-Hour Curriculum
3. Written student recruitment strategy
4. Staff Development Plan

COMMENTS / OBSERVATIONS

In dealing with the development of a an educational plan involving multiple, independent entities, it is important to realize that the time required to build the foundation may be longer than expected The diplomacy and sensitivity in dealing with "turf" concerns require a plodding, intensive, "never-say-die" attitude. In addition, because bringing a plan spanning two counties and multiple school districts involves a multitude of personalities and political beliefs, it is important to involve as many "players" as possible to broaden this and "base of support" requires a public relations campaign on a grand scale. Also, it is realistic to never underestimate the threat that change represents to people of all kind.

Our experiences have shown that it is not unreasonable to expect consensus involving various independent educational institutions to take at least a year. It has also been our experience that it would also be wise to calculate the number of hours necessary to get a large undertaking accomplished, then multiply by four.

In summary, the work involved in proposing and planning an inter-county educational partnership is intense and time consuming; however, for those who believe in the resultant benefits, the work also promises to be fruitful and rewarding.